

# Discussion types

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A review of instructor and student-led types of academic discussion, and specific processes for how each type may be conducted during class.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Select the most appropriate type of academic discussion for the purpose of the class session in which it will be held—either instructor-led or student-led. Then, choose a specific process, or way of carrying out the selected type of academic discussion. For assistance, [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

By holding an academic discussion in your class, you are employing an active learning technique. Using this technique first requires deciding the type of academic discussion that best suits the purpose and topic. No matter the type used, an academic discussion is structured and requires planning of pre, during, and post activities just as any other active learning technique. After selecting the type of academic discussion, proceed to choosing the specific process most appropriate for your academic discussion.

### Most common discussion types

Instructor-led or student-led are two main types of classroom discussion. While the instructor will take a facilitator’s role in both types, one type also has the instructor leading the conversation, while the other type has students take the lead. For more information on student-led discussions, please see the CET resource on this topic.

Table Most common discussion types

|  | *Instructor-led* | *Student-led* |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Description | Traditional discussion in which instructor creates and/or asks most questions, and expects students to answer. | Discussion in which students create and ask most questions, and students answer while instructor facilitates/monitors. |
| Pros | Less prep time required; easier to ensure that the discussion addresses specific, desired content; can be less-structured. | Student-centered; more student talk; can lead to more equitable participation; can promote intrinsic motivation feelings of mastery, autonomy, and connectedness. |
| Cons | Instructor-centered; more “teacher talk” so teacher voice can dominate discussion; can lead to a conversation between the instructor and a few extroverted students; can be more challenging to measure/grade participation. | More planning to design activity to ensure students are guided and on-task as they take the lead; some traditional instructors may feel uncomfortable allowing students to take a structured lead; students may not perform as effective discussion-leaders. |
| Best Uses | Including moments for ungraded participation; using cold calling; having spontaneous discussions | Teaching the skill of discussion leading; making students more responsible for their learning, developing student leadership skills. |

A quick Internet search proves there are many processes or ways of carrying out an academic discussion. Once you have determined whether the class discussion will be instructor or student-led, proceed to selecting the most appropriate process. Some of the many processes are described below and can work for any size class. They can be adapted for restricted mobility in a room and/or for online courses. In all cases, the instructor will need to plan what the students should prepare or do before, during, and after the discussion.

### Instructor-led processes

The main tenet of instructor-led processes are that the instructor usually has a speaking role in the discussion. Any instructor-led process could become a student-led one, but would require an increase in planning and structure.

#### Open/Free

This style of discussion is meant to happen naturally with no particular speaking order for students. The instructor typically pauses a lecture every so often to pose open-ended, content-related questions to the class as a whole. The instructor either plans these questions in advance, or comes up with them spontaneously. Any student is free to answer. This style can also be accomplished with technology through polling. See the CET resource on Implementing Polling if interested.

#### Think-pair-share/Snowball

This style of discussion is a variation of the previous one. It requires the instructor to create the questions or prompts in advance, allow individual students time to think alone about their answers first, and then share their thoughts with a selected or assigned partner/classmate. Finally, the pairs would share their collected thoughts with the whole class. The instructor may also visit each pair to guide the students. A snowball discussion is another variety of think-pair-share in which pairs then combine with other pairs to discuss, then groups of four with other groups of four to discuss, and so on to grow the discussion.

#### Stations/Gallery walk

This style of discussion requires the instructor to set up several places in the room where students will be asked to stop, gather with others, and discuss the prompt or item at that spot. Discussion questions/prompts/items can be taped to the wall or furniture at each station. The instructor tells students when to move to the next station and begin discussing the next prompt. The instructor also visits each station to guide the student conversations taking place. When the stations are lined up down a hallway or one side wall of a room, this discussion style is called a gallery walk. Online classes would have students sorted into different breakout rooms to accomplish a similar activity.

### Student-led Processes

The main tenet of student-led styles is that the instructor rarely, if ever, speaks during the discussion. These are still facilitated by the instructor.

#### Affinity mapping/Diagramming

This style of discussion has students work in groups to pose broad questions/problems based on course content or readings. Group exchange questions and individual students in each group start to answer the question/problem they have been given using sticky notes (one idea per note) or by writing on chart paper. The instructor indicates when to stop generating answers/ideas and start working together to organize or categorize them. Each group then presents a conclusion. This style of discussion can be done online using white boards and breakout groups, or accomplished with technology that allows students to post virtual notes. To browse a database of such tools, see [USC Rossier’s Instructional Technology Group E-Learning Toolkit](http://rossier-itg.weebly.com/e-learning-toolkit).

#### Hot seat

This style of discussion is a form of role-play in which the one student in a group is assigned to the hot seat and stays in character or answers as their assigned figure, job title, position, etc. The other students are responsible for creating and asking questions to the student in the hot seat. The instructor can rotate students through the hot seat.

#### Fishbowl

This style of discussion creates two circles of student participants. The inner circle discusses while the outer circle observes and takes notes before trading roles. Variations include having fewer students in the center and more in the outer circle, having multiple groups of students that make inner and outer circles, or using backchannel discussions to facilitate a similar style of discussion with technology (see below).

#### Backchannel

This style of discussion happens while the main discussion is going on and requires students to use technology to participate. While half the class, or one group of students, participates in the main discussion by talking, the other half or group participates in their own discussion by posting/texting to a running chat. The group participating in the backchannel discussion often comments on the main discussion. Participants in the main discussion can review the backchannel discussion comments either live during their discussion and respond to them, or after the discussion as a whole-class reflection. Backchannel discussions frequently take place in online classes using the chat pod feature and at professional conferences.